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Confusion at Top Hampering LBJ

By Marquis Childs

THE party out of power enjoys the luxury of telling the party in power how to run the world. Overthrow Castro, stand firm on the treaty of perpetuity in Panama, get tough in Viet-Nam, these and other simple prescriptions come from Republican candidates in a campaign year.

They do not bear the awful burden of responsibility. It is a burden to which President Johnson, with only three months of experience in the office, has not yet adjusted. He is plagued in the conduct of foreign policy by the same confusion of lines of authority that troubled his predecessor.

In his case there is an added complication. Two layers of authority exist in the White House. With two or three conspicuous exceptions the Kennedy advisers are still at work. Johnson has brought in his own people to work with them.

With the best will in the world—and little if any evidence of jealousy or rivalry has come to light—no one is sure where continuing authority rests. And it is scarcely an answer to say, as some of the President's ardent champions have, that he has made X number of telephone calls dealing with foreign policy, has talked with Secretary of State Dean Rusk for Y number of hours and has brooded for Z number of midnights on the crises before him.

ADD to this the fact that the President is an intensely political animal. In a campaign year with only eight months until the election he would like to believe in a kind of moratorium on foreign policy with the tide of events held back abroad and criticism suspended at home.

One tendency, with the troubles in various corners of the world pressing harder, is to put up a new power structure. This was done for the conduct of Latin-American affairs as the riots in Panama exploded into the headlines.

The President appointed Thomas C. Mann, a career foreign service officer who had been Ambassador to Mexico, to be Assistant Secretary for Latin America in the State Department and at the same time to hold a special brief in the White House for dealing with all inter-American business. This arrangement has not worked as well as had been anticipated. The vital decisions have not been forthcoming. The new layer of authority has seemed to increase the volume of talk and the bulk of papers to be shifted from desk to desk. Panama is still in limbo.

For another even more crucial area —Viet-Nam—the same treatment is in prospect. With no more than two to three months of grace before hair-raising either/or decisions—to pull back or go in deeper with American forces in an undeclared war—must be taken, a special authority has been created for Viet-Nam. It has been moved out from under Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs Roger Hilsman who has endured a rugged buffeting in a well-nigh impossible office.

WHAT, one may ask, is the role of the Secretary of State in the new Administration? Rusk served President Kennedy well as builder and moulder for the architect who knew from day to day and almost from hour to hour the kind of structure he wanted. He was the able and faithful agent of a Chief Executive who was his own Secretary of State.

The new President has great confidence in Rusk who had on many occasions gone out of his way to keep Vice-President Johnson up to date on foreign policy and to guide him on his several foreign tours. In the transition it was said that Rusk would emerge as a new type of Secretary of State asserting himself as he had not done before.

This has not happened. If only for reasons of temperament perhaps the modest and unassuming man who is Secretary of State has not asserted a public presence, he has not discussed policy in broad new terms, he has not made the headlines that have in the past often originated in an office considered second only to that of the Presidency. It would have been an abrupt transition which Rusk has apparently not elected to make.

In the White House McGeorge Bundy, the President's adviser on security affairs, was Kennedy's alter ego and when he spoke he was known to be speaking for the President. However hard they may both try, nothing like the same closeness could exist with the new President.

So the poles of power are still uncertain, which is hardly surprising. The grim historical fact might be noted that President Kennedy had been in office only three months when on the recommendation of advisers he had inherited he ordered the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion.

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How LBJ Works

When Lyndon Johnson was Democratic leader in the Senate, he made it a point to get along amicably with the Republican Administration. After he became President, he may have expected the same forbearance from the opposition. But in this election year he is not getting it—and he is aroused.

Twice during the week he hit back. "Alarmists and people who like to jump on their government . . . will be almost as much of a problem as some of our other enemies," he told a group of tax collectors at the White House. "The best way to treat them is to just 'God forgive them, for they know not what they do'." He added that the number and severity of foreign crises are less now than they were when President Kennedy took office. In a speech in St. Louis, he denounced "twisted arguments that would damage the good name of our country."

Foreign policy was clearly the sore point, and the President was particularly nettled by charges that he neglects his foreign-affairs homework. Yet men who have advised both Presidents on foreign policy maintain there is no lessened effectiveness. Comparing the two men, McGeorge Bundy, Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs says: "Their intrinsic similarities are much greater than their differences."

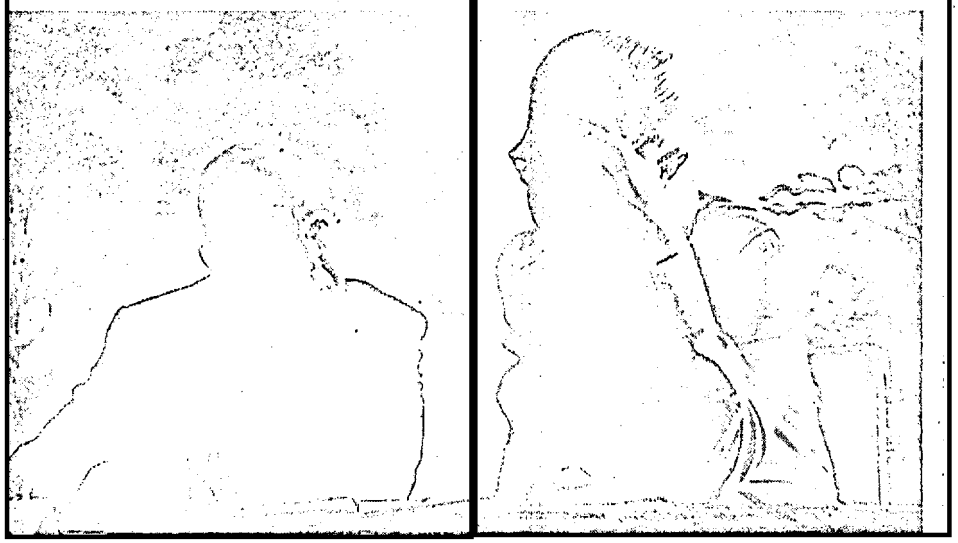
Memos: Mr. Johnson does veer from the Kennedy pattern in technique and style. He likes written memos rather than the oral briefings Mr. Kennedy preferred. The "don't-say-it-write-it" rule extends even to Secretary of State Dean Rusk who now submits a daily report to the President's office at 7:30 p.m. Mr. Johnson sits up in bed many nights until 1 or 2, poring over such documents.

The new President also solicits a greater variety of views than Mr. Kennedy did. He sees not only such top-ranking experts as CIA chief John McCone but more congressmen, more outsiders. He is being briefed almost constantly. Where Mr. Kennedy often put several people to work separately on the same problem, he sticks to lines of command. And his aides are especially struck by Mr. Johnson's "telephonitis" and his effectiveness with the instrument. Sometimes he puts it to unorthodox uses; in the early hours of the Canal Zone crisis, he placed a direct call to Panama's President Roberto Chiari.

Logjam: Aides also comment on the new President's deliberateness. "Kennedy always made you feel that he had other pressing things to do," one top adviser says, "but Johnson wants to look at all sides of a problem, then turn them over and look again." Sometimes this deliberateness causes a logjam of papers on his desk—something that rarely occurred under Mr. Kennedy.

Unlike his predecessor, he works with the door to his office closed, and no one has walk-in privileges. His aides shrug this off. "You can't expect him to be as relaxed with us after three months as Kennedy was after years of close association," one holdover says. "After all, he inherited us."

He has also inherited all of the late President's foreign problems—but, unhappily, little of Mr. Kennedy's sangfroid in taking the criticism that comes with them.



CIA's McCone and the President: 'Don't-say-it-write-it'